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ABSTRACT

The British Library supports research by collecting and maintaining the national archive; by ensuring the provision of the national bibliography; by building up its collections of research materials from all over the world; and by providing access to its collections through reading rooms and interlending and document delivery services. This paper examines some of the questions of mission and ethics that the British Library has recently been addressing. Discussion includes: (1) Library policy admitting mainly users in the scholarly and research communities; (2) the role of the Internet in drawing in more of the user population; (3) Library income, expenditures and Government grants; (4) the question of charging fees for accessing reading rooms; (5) maintaining a modest level of grant-in-aid funding and finding alternative funding sources; (6) extending the legal deposit law which currently applies only to printed materials to include the deposit of non-print publications; (7) partnerships with the private sector; and (8) public policy developed to address legal, economic, and ethical issues. (AEF)

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE LIBRARY: MISSIONS AND ETHICS

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ED 433 835

I recognise that the theme of your conference - the changing role of the library - focuses on academic libraries and the changes that will stem from the changes in educational structures and organisations, and in new approaches to teaching and learning. Given that national libraries play a significant role in the educational systems of their countries, these changes will also impact on them. However what I should like to do in the time allotted to me this morning is to describe some of the broader questions of mission and ethics that the British Library has recently been addressing. The British Library experience is I believe of relevance to all national libraries, and much of it to academic libraries.

National Libraries depend upon the general public for their very existence. All of them survive to a very great extent on the tax payer. In the face of huge competing pressure on government funding, particularly for education and health, national libraries will only flourish if they have political support, and that political support will only be forthcoming if there is a general recognition that national libraries make a significant contribution to national life.

The British Library is going through an exciting yet critical period in its development. Exciting because next month we see the completion of our move into the new British Library building at St Pancras. Critical because we have felt it important now to undertake a very thorough and fundamental review of all of the Library's activities. In essence, asking what a British Library of the future is for, who it should serve, and how it should serve them. One of the answers we must provide is how we balance our services to other libraries, to scholarship, research and innovation with those to the general public. Who should pay for these services? The user, the taxpayer or should the activity be funded from some other source? Is the Library seeking, or seen to be elitist, serving a relatively small group of scholars and researchers, or does it have a wider purpose?

For the last 10 years the Library had described itself in its strapline as 'the world's greatest resource for research, scholarship and innovation' - no mention there of the general public; and yet alongside its services to the research community, industry and academia it always had a modest wider public access programme. I shall turn to this later.

It supports research by collecting and maintaining the national archive, by ensuring the provision of the national bibliography, by building up its collections of research materials from all over the world, and by providing access to its collections through reading rooms and interlending and document delivery services.

There is certainly nothing elitist about the national archive. Much of it comprises low level fiction, newspapers, leisure journals, popular music and so on. Certainly these will be valuable materials for researchers both now and in the future. But in itself the collection is not elitist and contains much that is of interest and value to the general public, be it for matters of family history or recreational use. There is, I believe, support from the public for the idea of a national archive, something which helps embody the

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history and culture of the nation and which in itself is an expression of nationhood.

But who uses this collection? The British Library has long recognised that for the most part it cannot act as a 'super public Library' open to all. It would be simply overwhelmed were it to try to do so. It must look to the academic, government, commercial and public library systems to provide the front line support for the vast majority of users and use. The British Library has therefore developed a policy of admitting to its Reading Rooms only those who have a recognised need to use the national collection, a need which cannot be met by other means. Again, this is not in itself an elitist approach The Library is, as I said, open to all who need to use it and furthermore to do so in the reading rooms free of charge. However it is clear in practice that the majority of people who do use the reading rooms are researchers and scholars of one kind or another. Nevertheless a significant proportion are what might be called 'the public' use the library not for professional purposes but in pursuit of their own personal interest.

Similarly the users of the interlibrary loan and document supply services are predominately from academic and industrial institutions but again a significant number are from public libraries and of these it must be assumed that some of the use is for private rather for professional or commercial reasons.

Thus some hundreds of thousands of the general public are using the Library each year, yet this remains a very very tiny fraction of the total population.

So how can we touch the lives of a greater part of the population? In one sense the new St Pancras building itself has made a great impact. First, as the largest and most expensive public building put up in Britain this century, it is a very prominent statement of the government's commitment to the national library. Furthermore despite the criticism of its architectural style it has become, since opening, recognised as one of the most outstanding recent examples of British architecture. It has become a landmark for the capital and a national building of which every citizen can be proud. More importantly it provides the opportunity for greater numbers of the public to view and enjoy a much an enlarged exhibition space, to see the richness of the King's Library in its glass tower, to attend an ever increasing number of events - lectures, films, music, dance, readings - which are held there, or simply to have a cup of coffee or a meal and enjoy the architecture and the ambience. In the first year of opening some five hundred thousand people have visited the library for these various purposes. We expect this to grow to seven hundred and fifty thousand this year and to increase thereafter.

But it is not the building which provides the greatest opportunities for public access, it is that other great public space - the internet. Technology is and will be the key to making the Library relevant to more people. Use of the Library's website is growing enormously. Over 40 million hits a year and over 10,000 searches a day on the OPAC. A high proportion of this usage comes from our traditional communities but general public use is growing. Already many more people have seen the digital images of Beowulf on the web than have ever seen the originals in our exhibition cases.

So far what I have said all seems very easy. We continue to serve our core scholarly and research community and at the same time expand our outreach. So why did I say earlier that we were at a critical stage of the British Library's development?

The British Library, like other national libraries, has some underlying characteristics which make it ever more difficult to continue to fulfil its traditional role, or which mean that if it is to continue unchanged, then it will require much greater financial resource. I will mention just three simple drivers. First the task of taking in under legal deposit the output of the nation's publishers. In the UK this has been growing consistently at some 5% per annum for several years. Each 'free' book costs money to process, catalogue and store and, in due course preserve. Second, price inflation for scholarly books and journals - a phenomenum with which every library is having to grapple, but for a national library, because of the size of

its requirement brings in absolute terms huge financial pressures. And third, the ever-increasing size of our collection (national libraries do not have much freedom to dispose of material) and the associated cost of housing that material and preserving it. These factors, and some others, mean that if the Library is to continue in the way it has done in the past then some extra £20 million per annum would be required in three years time, on top of the £80 million we currently receive as grant-in-aid. It is unlikely that any government would be able to countenance such unending increases and, whilst the UK government, has promised extra support it falls below the level we regard as necessary.

Income & Expenditure 1997/98 (£ms)	**Total Expenditure**	**Sales & Donation Income**	**Government Grant**
Collection-related activities			
Acquisition cost of new items added to the collection	11.9	0.7	11.2
Other Collection Development & Collection Management Costs	34.3	0.2	34.1
Services to end-users			
Reading room services	11.8	1.0	10.8
Remote document supply	26.6	24.2	2.4
Reference & Information Services	8.3	1.0	7.3
Wider Public Access			
Exhibitions, Events/Education, Publications, Bookshop	5.7	2.6	3.1
Services to the UK library network			
Bibliographic Services	3.0	1.9	1.1
Research & Development	5.9	2.5	3.4
Leadership, Partnership and Co-operation	3.5	0.9	2.5
TOTALS	**111.0**	**35.1**	**75.9**

Footnote: Totals exclude Library income of £0.1m and expenditure of £10.4m on its St Pancras project in 1997/98 and miscellaneous items of expenditure totalling £0.9m (and offset by income of £0.9m) not attributable to the activities in the table above

It was against this background that last year the Library embarked upon a major strategic review which was informed by a substantial consultation exercise with all its stakeholders.

Within this review the Library's Board felt that it could not ignore, given its financial difficulties, the question of charging for access to the reading rooms. Depending on the level and method of charging the Library estimated that it could raise £3-6 million per annum by these means. Sums sufficiently large not to be discounted lightly. There are perfectly respectable economic and ethical arguments that can be advanced for charging for access, but given the national and international impact of any decision in this area the Board thought it right to include this as one of the many questions in the consultation exercise.

The results of this review were that the highest priority for the Library should be placed on:

- the continued development and centrality of the collection
- the preservation of the new library's collection
- the inclusion and integration of digital materials
- improved access through reading room services
- no charging of readers for access to reading rooms
- improved access through remote document supply services
- improved access through web based services
- continuing effects to achieve still greater efficiency savings and income generation
- much greater collaboration with other libraries on collecting, access and preservation.

Significantly most of our stakeholders suggested that the priority for grant-in-aid funding should go to core services serving scholars rather than to wider public access. And yet one key stakeholder - the government - has a policy of supporting wider access, a policy of social inclusion, of life long learning, and of creating digital content which can support wider access through networked public libraries, university libraries, and other learning centres for which it is giving financial support.

Thus there is a seeming dilemma - on the one hand we are asked to give highest priority by many of our stakeholders to what might be described as elitist services yet on the other hand the government, our greatest financial supporter, has a very clear policy of social inclusion. The answer of course lies in alternative sources of funding, but this cannot be the complete answer. Some activities, eg publishing and the book shop can be self supporting and indeed profit making without compromising their purpose. Exhibitions can and do attract sponsorship but our experience suggests that even the most generous sponsorship (and we have had several examples of this) will not meet the full cost. We have therefore concluded that we must maintain a modest level of grant-in-aid funding for our wider public access programme and see its expansion and development based on attracting increasing sponsorship and other revenue earning activities.

But as I said earlier the greatest outreach will stem from the development of web-based services supported by an ever growing mass of digital content some of which will itself be developed through sponsorship, some from the use of grant-in-aid, some from working with the private sector and much, we hope, through legal deposit.

As a national library we believe that our mission of ensuring the collection and maintenance of the national archive remains, a review reinforced by the consultation exercise.

If we are to continue to fulfil this mission we believe it essential that the UK's legal deposit law - which currently applies only to print-on-paper - be extended to include the deposit of non-print publications. For the past three years we have therefore been working with publishers to develop a proposal which could go to Government with the backing of both UK publishers and the UK legal deposit libraries. The principle of legal deposit is one that is accepted by publishers - much of the discussion has been about the access that the libraries can give to the deposited materials during their term in copyright (this in itself is an interesting ethical question - how far should the commercial interests of the publisher be affected for the public good that comes through legal deposit?).

I am glad to say that an agreed proposal was put to the Government last year and the Government has accepted the principle that the legal deposit laws should be extended and has committed itself to introducing such legislation at some future date. Meantime, in advance of a mandatory system, publishers and the legal deposit libraries are working together to introduce a voluntary scheme later this year.

However, we are all learning that providing services from digital materials does not come cheap.

If the British Library is to collect and preserve non-print publications (the preservation aspects bring huge challenges), and to provide access to them in a coherent way in the Reading Rooms; and to collect or provide access to digital content originating outside the UK; and to digitize important printed holdings for the benefit of a wider audience - then the costs of providing the appropriate infrastructure and services will be very significant, and unlikely to be affordable from the Library's normal running costs.

Against this background the Library decided some two years ago to seek partnerships with the private sector to develop its digital library infrastructure and services. In so doing it had to address a number of legal, economic and ethical issues. How far should a public body go in ceding control of some of its operations to the private sector in return for private sector money? I will mention three important decisions that we took:

1. The Library must always control its acquisitions policy.
2. The Library must control its pricing and service policies for its statutory and other public good services.
3. It could surrender control of its value-added services.

In the event, after a good deal of effort, the Library and its preferred private sector partners were unable to conclude a deal and amicably disengaged from the process. The reasons why a deal couldn't be struck centred around the Library's public good responsibilities and the private sectors commercial imperatives. The whole process has however been helpful for the Library in raising awareness of the issue with Government and subsequently engaging their support in seeking further public sector funding for this important initiative.

In this presentation I have sought to show how the British Library has addressed some key questions about its mission and some ethical questions that have been posed along the way.

To sum up I would say that the basic, traditional mission of the Library has been validated and seen as enduring. But there are greater opportunities and calls for it to reach a wider audience, be they life-long learners or simply the interested public. It has had to address the ethical, political and practical questions of who pays for what services, and how far the private sector can play a role in funding and operating them.

I am sure that you all face similar challenges and I hope that this brief outline of how the British Library has addressed them will contribute to the aims of your conference.

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